

Who are the Abstainers?

“Where alcohol is known, patterns for its use and for abstention are proscribed, usually in fine detail.”

–Mandelbaum 1979

INTRODUCTION

The consumption and production of alcohol have played a major role in many societies throughout the ages. Much attention has been devoted to describing what people drink, why they drink and their drinking patterns, yet comparably little interest has been awarded the other side of the drinking equation, namely those individuals who, for a variety of reasons, do not drink. The proportions of drinkers and abstainers vary from one culture to the next, and even within a given culture may change, driven by social, economic and political factors. Just as drinkers form an integral part of a drinking culture, so do abstainers. Just as cultural norms shape patterns of drinking, they equally shape patterns of abstention.

This report will attempt to provide a cross-cultural overview of abstainers, their abstention patterns, and some of their many reasons for abstaining from alcohol. The data presented in this report also reflect preliminary results obtained through an international survey conducted among selected experts in the alcohol field. Respondents from 20 countries provided us with the best available sources of data from their respective countries, and additional data were derived from published materials.

WHAT IS AN ABSTAINER?

Abstainers exist wherever there are drinkers, often in considerable numbers. Population surveys attempt to quantify abstainers as well as drinkers, but these attempts may be problematic. There is some inconsistency in the way abstainers are defined and, in fact, how they define themselves. In some cases, only lifetime abstainers who have never consumed alcohol are taken into account. In others, abstainers are defined as not having consumed alcohol during a fixed period of time, or as having consumed alcohol no more than a given number of times a year. For example, the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Study dataset compiled by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in the United States¹ defines abstainers as individuals who have “never had more than 12 drinks in any year of life.”

In 1999, ICAP conducted a survey among key alcohol specialists around the world regarding the nature of abstainers in different countries, their relative proportions, demographics, and their reasons for abstaining. The survey was sent to individuals active in the alcohol field – health professionals, researchers and government officials working in the field of public health. In selecting the experts to be contacted, attention was paid to broad geographic coverage. Information received consisted primarily of published data available in a particular country in the form of surveys and official government data sets. Data obtained from this survey are summarized in this report, with a full analysis to be published elsewhere. Other information, derived from published surveys and available materials is also included.

As the results from the survey indicate, definitions used to compile data on abstainers cover a broad range (See Table). Popular definitions of abstainers include “lifetime abstainers,” but also “former drinkers,” “no alcohol in past 12 (or 24) months,” and “drink 5 or fewer times a year.” The Austrian data obtained even differentiate between groups of abstainers: in addition to “primary abstainers” (i.e., lifetime abstainers), there are also “secondary abstainers,” namely former drinkers. Both groups, however, are characterized as being almost completely abstinent.² An explanatory note in the text emphasizes that this “near abstinence” makes allowances for even those opposed to drinking alcohol to enjoy an occasional drink and still be able to call themselves abstainers. This allowance most likely reflects a culture which is permissive to alcohol and in which drinking is integrated into many facets of daily life.

Cultural attitudes are also apparent in the definition of abstainers derived from the Israeli sample (See Table). There, the criterion is “no alcohol in the past 12 months for social purposes,” reflecting the distinction between social consumption of alcohol and alcohol consumed within the context of religion. Similarly, cultural attitudes are reflected in one of the responses obtained from the Netherlands which suggests that many light drinkers (for example, those consuming fewer than two drinks once a month) might consider themselves abstainers.³ The survey response received from Zimbabwe indicates that consumption of traditional beverages may also at times be excluded from the definition of abstainers (See Table).

Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of culture coloring the definition of abstainers is the discussion by Moskalewicz and Zielinski of a survey conducted in Poland.⁴ It became apparent to the researchers conducting the study that almost without exception, those who defined themselves as abstainers and claimed not to drink actually meant that they did not drink vodka – all other beverages were not considered “real drinking.”

As Heath⁵ points out, inconsistency in the way abstainers are defined poses a number of problems when it comes to comparing variables such as health between abstainers and groups of drinkers. In these cases, it is important to know whether the so-called abstainer does not drink at all or drinks lightly, and consequently whether he or she should best be compared to someone who drinks more frequently or to someone who never drinks.

Yet despite variations in the way abstainers are defined, they do appear to share some common traits. The results of the survey suggest that, in general, abstainers have lower incomes and levels of

education, and are more likely to be older and to be female. This is also confirmed by a number of other studies which have looked at different traits among abstainers.⁶ In some countries, abstainers are also more likely to belong to certain subpopulations. In the United States, for instance, they are more likely to be African-American or from the southern states,⁷ while in Australia, the proportion of abstainers among Aboriginals is higher than among other groups.⁸ Another common characteristic which seems to be shared by abstainers across cultures is that they are more likely to be religious and less tolerant of others' drinking.⁹

WHY DO PEOPLE ABSTAIN FROM DRINKING?

Reasons for abstaining from alcohol are numerous and complex. For some, abstention is a matter of personal taste, for others a question of religious faith, and for others still, a matter of health. According to studies of abstainers, some of the major reasons cited for not drinking include moral objection to drinking, dislike of the consequences and a desire to remain in control, and an abstinent family background.¹⁰ There are also those for whom abstinence is part of a particular recovery program, such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Attitudes towards drinking and abstention seem to be shaped early in life by external influences and role models. Especially among women, family influences play an important role in shaping views on drinking and abstention, and abstainers are more likely to come from abstaining families.¹¹ However, social factors and the environment can strongly modulate these influences.¹² The perception of alcohol norms within the immediate social circle – peers and friends and their respective approval of drinking – play a significant role.¹³ In a WHO study on health-related behavior among European school-aged children, social factors, such as spending less time with friends, and school factors (such as truancy and pressure) were predictors of abstinence, especially among boys.¹⁴

One of the most important factors in shaping attitudes about abstinence is religion.¹⁵ This is certainly true of the responses obtained in the survey conducted by ICAP, in which religion was given most frequently as a reason for abstinence. As a general rule, religious traditions which do not integrate alcohol into their ceremonies are also those which tend to discourage their members from drinking. Among Christians, those who belong to more proscriptive groups, such as Mormon, Pentecostal and Baptist, are more likely to be abstainers.

Islam also forbids the consumption of alcohol as one of several religious proscriptions (*haraam*) explicitly mentioned in the Koran. In countries which follow Islamic *sharia* law, religious prohibition of alcohol is nationally mandated. Such countries include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iran, and Islamic law and prohibition of alcohol have more recently been implemented in other countries. In Nigeria, for instance, where the two main religions are Christianity and Islam, Koranic law has been introduced in the northern state of Zamfara, where the sale and consumption of alcohol are now being reconsidered.¹⁶

Christianity and Islam are not unique in their approach to abstinence. Other religions also include it among requirements for their followers. The Buddhist *sutras* enumerate the disadvantages of

drinking and the last of Buddha's five commandments specifically forbids drinking.¹⁷ Among Hindus, alcohol is forbidden for Brahmins and members of other upper-caste groups, who are also Buddha's strict vegetarians. Castes for whom there are no such dietary restrictions on meat – for example warriors, farmers, and scavenger-untouchables – are permitted to also consume alcohol.¹⁸ In India, changes in the social code have largely done away with the caste system, yet abstinence is still widespread. Prohibition remains an aspiration in the Indian Constitution, the teachings of Gandhi, and the ascetic tradition which advocates that one way to advance national purity is through legal prohibition. Although the national ban on alcohol has been lifted, prohibition persists to some degree in several states in India and alcohol remains absent from the lives of most religiously pure people.¹⁹

Even in societies which are culturally diverse and in which numerous religions are represented, traditional adherence to abstinence can still be observed within certain groups. Adherence to religious practices, including abstention, seems to be stronger where there is a greater sense of community. Cultural homogeneity is vastly important for learning norms and for their reinforcement. In addition, constant religious activity reinforces conformist behavior, and with respect to alcohol, unfavorable attitudes towards drinkers. These effects can be observed in a study of Muslim households of Cape Town in South Africa, in which 88% of those interviewed did not drink.²⁰ Even though they lived in an ethnically and culturally diverse area in which viticulture is prominent, these individuals had strong cultural ties and a well-developed sense of cultural and religious identity.

A similar phenomenon also exists within the United States, another multiethnic and culturally heterogeneous society. The southern states, traditionally rural, conservative, and strongly rooted in Protestant culture, have the highest rates of abstention in the country, often twice those of other parts of the country.²¹ In some areas, up to half the population abstains from drinking, most frequently citing moral-religious reasons.²² Abstinance is encouraged by churches and religious organizations, and even among those who themselves drink, attitudes towards drinking are often unfavorable.²³

Among abstainers, another key reason for not drinking is related to health issues. For some, a particular medical condition or a history of alcohol dependence and problems makes it inadvisable to continue drinking. For others, alcohol in combination with certain medications may pose health risks. Still others may perceive alcohol consumption as unhealthy and likely to lead to dependence. Concern for health was one of the major reasons cited across cultures by respondents to the survey. It is interesting to speculate whether, in light of evidence supporting possible health benefits associated with moderate alcohol consumption, changes might be observed over the long-term in patterns of abstention.

Some dependent or problem drinkers who have become abstainers for health-related reasons are often referred to as "sick quitters," again raising the issue of how abstainers are defined and whether, for the purposes of analysis, this group should be addressed as a separate population. It appears, on the whole, that long-term or lifetime abstainers differ considerably from these former

problem drinkers. Compared to former problem drinkers, lifetime abstainers generally enjoy better health (physical and mental), higher socioeconomic status, lower rates of unemployment, and lower rates of substance abuse,²⁴ thus possibly confounding comparisons between drinkers and abstainers.

Finally, abstinence from alcohol for health reasons is recommended by a number of governments for pregnant women and those who are attempting to conceive. While not all governments concur, the official guidelines on alcohol consumption from a number of countries include explicit advice to pregnant women. While the scientific evidence on the threshold at which the effects of alcohol consumption may become detrimental to fetal development is inconclusive, official guidelines recommend at the very least a decrease in alcohol consumption during pregnancy, and some urge complete abstinence from alcohol. A full review of this topic is offered in *ICAP Reports 6*.²⁵

ABSTAINERS ACROSS CULTURES

Having explored some of the reasons which underlie abstinence from alcohol, it is interesting to examine what proportion of individuals in different countries around the world actually abstain from drinking. The results obtained through the international survey as well as through a review of the available literature are summarized in the Table and offer a comparison of the demographics of abstainers, where available, broken down by gender.

As the numbers obtained through the survey indicate, the rates of abstention vary significantly across countries. The data obtained were derived predominantly from official published surveys on drinking patterns in different countries. The proportion of abstainers reported across countries ranges from as low as 4% of the total population in Australia (defined here as never having tried alcohol)²⁶ to as high as 70% of the population in Sri Lanka.²⁷ Given the role of alcohol in different societies and the proscriptions that exist against its consumption, these differences may be easily explained. The one consistency, however, that seems to transcend cultures is the difference in abstention rates between men and women. Invariably, higher proportions of women than men abstain from alcohol, reflecting in many cases non-permissive views on women and drinking.

However, in each case, it is important to bear in mind that patterns of abstinence, just like patterns of drinking, may differ within particular subpopulations and across different regions of a particular country. This is especially the case in multicultural and multiethnic societies, in which different groups may represent quite diverse traditions with respect to alcohol. In India, for example, the proportions of abstainers vary across regions and abstinence is most commonly found among Muslims and Jain.²⁸

Similarly, in the United States, the rates of abstention vary significantly across ethnic groups. According to the NLAES dataset,²⁹ while the total rate of lifetime abstainers is 34%, 30.7% of Caucasians do not drink, compared with 33.4% of Native Americans, 46.8% of Hispanics, 48.7% of African-Americans, and 63.3% of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Among women, abstention rates are lowest among whites (41.6%) and highest among Asian American women (77.5%); among men, the rates are similarly lowest among whites (19%) and highest among

Asian Americans (63.3%). Even within the individual ethnic groups, there is variation. Among American Indians, for example, proportions of drinkers and abstainers vary among tribes, possibly attributable to differences in the degree of tolerance.³⁰ Similarly, Hispanics in the United States are of different origins, with regional, class, and other differences accounting for variation among sub-groups.³¹ The degree of acculturation has also been shown to affect rates of abstinence among immigrant populations. In a study of Mexican-American women, 75% of immigrant women were abstainers, while among third generation Mexican-American women, the rate was 38%, closer to that for women in the general U.S. population.³²

Australia, another country with considerable cultural variation among its population, also shows differences in proportions of abstainers. As in the United States, immigrants from Asia were more likely to be abstainers than people born in Australia or immigrants from anywhere else.³³ Among the Australian Aboriginal population, abstention rates are also higher than among the general population. In a national survey, 31% of male Aboriginals and 65% of female Aboriginals were non-drinkers.³⁴ Rates among urban samples were higher than among rural populations, but women were still more likely than men to be abstainers.³⁵

Differences in abstention rates also exist in countries which traditionally do not represent as wide a range of ethnic diversity but in which different cultures and religious traditions have come together. In Britain, according to a 1990 survey, approximately 12% of women and 7% of men are likely to be non-drinkers; in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, over 50% of women and around 30% of men abstain from alcohol.³⁶

SUMMARY

As this report has attempted to illustrate, the world of abstainers is probably as diverse as the world of drinkers, similarly governed by norms and culture. The information presented here provides an overview of abstainers, their demographics, similarities and differences, and their many reasons for abstaining. While drinking patterns and the drinking cultures around the world have been examined time and again, the culture of abstinence has largely been ignored. To understand the full spectrum of drinkers and drinking patterns, however, it is important to gain insight into the world of abstainers. Much can be learned from the influences which shape abstainers and the cultural norms which persist even in a changing world.

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Table: International Comparison of Abstainer Demographics

Country (date of survey)	Definition	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total (%)	Notes
Australia (1993) ¹	Never tried alcohol ^a ; No longer drink alcohol ^b	31 ^{a+b}	19 ^{a+b}	4 ^a	National survey (ages 20+)
Australia (1995) ²	Non-drinker: ^a never tried alcohol or no longer drink alcohol; Lifetime abstainer ^b	27 ^a	17 ^a	12.2 ^b	National survey (ages 20+)
Australia(1998) ³	Lifetime abstainers			10.4	National survey (ages 20+)
Austria (1993/1994) ⁴	Primary abstainer: never had beverage alcohol	17.3	6.4	12	National survey (ages 16+)
Bolivia (1996) ⁵	Lifetime abstainers	24.4	15.7	20.8	Urban survey (ages 12-50)
Canada (1996/1997) ⁶	No alcohol in past 12 mos.				National survey (ages 15+)
	a) Lifetime abstainers	12.5	6.9	9.7	
	b) Former drinkers	15.4	11.5	13.5	
Canada/Quebec (1994) ⁷	No alcohol in past 12 mos.				Regional survey (ages 20+)
	a) Lifetime abstainers	17	8	13	
	b) Temporary abstainers	16	12	14	
Chile (1997) ⁸	Lifetime abstainers	29.6	25.5	27.6	Survey of 13 regions (ages unavailable)
Chile (1998) ⁹	Drink <5 times/year and do not get drunk			29.16	National study (ages 12-64)
China (1994) ¹⁰	No alcohol in past 12 mos.	74.4	17.4	45.3	Six area surveys (ages 15-65)
Columbia (1987) ¹¹	No lifetime consumption	49	19	33	Urban survey (ages 12-64)
Costa Rica (1995) ¹²	Never consumed alcoholic beverages	70.6	29.4	37.6	National survey (ages 15+)
Dominican Republic (1992) ¹³	No lifetime consumption	41	28	35	Urban survey (ages 12-45)
Ecuador (1989) ¹⁴	No lifetime consumption			24.3	National survey (ages 10+)
Fiji (2000) ¹⁵	Do not drink alcohol			40	Key informant survey response (ages unavailable)
Finland (1996) ¹⁶	No alcohol in past 12 mos.	14	7		National statistics (ages 15-69)
France (1995/1996) ¹⁷	"Never drink" (Self-response)	7.3	1.5	4.5	National study (ages 18+)
Guatemala (1990) ¹⁸	No lifetime consumption	52	35	43	Urban survey (ages 12-45)
Haiti (1990) ¹⁹	No lifetime consumption	44	40	42	Urban survey (ages 12-45)
Ireland (1998) ²⁰	"Never drink" (Self-response)			28	National sample (ages 18+)

Table: International Comparison of Abstainer Demographics

Country (date of survey)	Definition	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total (%)	Notes
Israel (1998) ²¹	No alcohol in past 12 mos. for social purposes				National survey
	a) 12-18 years old	51.5	32.5	43.1	
	b) 18-40 years old	48.7	21	35	
Italy (1997) ²²	No alcohol beverages in past 3 mos.	30	15	22.7	National survey (ages 15+)
Jamaica (1990) ²³	No lifetime consumption	80	55	68	National survey (ages 15+)
Mexico (1993) ²⁴	No alcohol in past 24 months			26	National survey (ages 12-65)
Netherlands (1998) ²⁵	No consumption (0 glasses/day)	26	12.3	22	National survey (ages 16+)
Netherlands (1998) ²⁶	Self-reported abstainer	21	9		National survey (ages 16+)
Netherlands (1999) ²⁷	Never consume alcohol				National survey (ages 16+)
	a) DNFCS-2 data	25	11.4		National survey (ages 15+)
	b) LDNFCS-3 data	25	11.4		
Peru (1990) ²⁸	No life consumption			8	Urban survey (ages 12-50)
Poland (1996) ²⁹	No alcohol in past 12 mos.	40.4	18.4	30.2	National survey (ages 15+)
Poland (1998) ³⁰	No alcohol in past 12 mos.			19	National survey (ages 18+)
Russia (2000) ³¹	N/A (definition varies)			4-5	Key informant survey response (ages unavailable)
Sri Lanka (1999) ³²	Do not ever drink alcohol	95		70	Key informant survey response (ages unavailable)
United Kingdom (1996) ³³	Do not drink nowadays				National survey (ages 16+)
	a) Total as % of population	13	7		
	b) Lifetime as % of abstainers	58	52		
United States (1992) ³⁴	Lifetime abstainers: Never had 12+ drinks in any year of life	45.3	21.7	34	National survey (ages 18+)
United States (1997) ³⁵	Lifetime abstainers	22.5	13.4	28.1	National survey (ages 12+)
United States (1999) ³⁶	Self-reported total abstainer			36	National opinion poll (ages 18+)
Venezuela (1996) ³⁷	Never consumed alcohol in lifetime			28.9	National survey (ages unavailable)
Zimbabwe (1971) ³⁸	Do not drink alcohol except African beer on ceremonial occasions in rural areas			46	Urban survey (ages unavailable)

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The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) is dedicated to helping reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide and to promoting understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community and others interested in alcohol policy. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization supported by eleven major international beverage alcohol companies.

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